

# The Guardian



## Trevor Key: photography's best-kept secret

From the Sex Pistols to *Tubular Bells*, this photographer-cum-designer collaborated on some of music's greatest cover art

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**F**ew can match Trevor Key's visual contribution to pop culture across three decades. And yet in the relentless retelling of British pop history, the books, exhibitions and BBC Four documentaries, Key seldom rates a mention.

Jamie Reid is rightly credited as the prime source of the Sex Pistols' visual aesthetic, but as photographer and designer, Key played a major role in the manufacture of their image. In the many, many articles and books written about the history of punk, Key is largely invisible. He has, at times, literally been written out of history. And while Peter Saville and Factory Records will be inextricably linked in the story of popular music, Key's role in the creation of the album covers that became so meaningful for generations of record buyers has been frequently ignored.

Key was born in Hull in 1947. He studied photography at the local art college and, by 1969, had moved to London and was assisting photographer Don McAllester on another landmark sleeve: the Rolling Stones' *Let it Bleed*, using a cake created by a young Delia Smith.



Key's Tubular Bells cover

With fellow photographer Brian Cooke, he formed Cooke Key Associates, the de facto art department at Virgin Records. Along with Virgin's John Varnom, the pair gleefully translated Reid's iconoclasm into the daily acts of rebellion that, through newspaper ads, record shop window displays, posters and more manufactured the Pistols' image and legend. "It was all very sensationalised, and Virgin wanted it to be that way. It all got banned - and that's what sold it," Cooke told *Creative Review* in 2013.

Yet, just a few years before, Key had been responsible for a sleeve that epitomised everything punk rejected: Mike Oldfield's *Tubular Bells*. Fast-forward to the 80s and here is Key again, collaborating with Peter Saville to create achingly beautiful imagery for New Order, including the sleeves for *Technique*, *True Faith* and *Substance*. There's more: across three decades of working in the music industry, Key's photographs helped define the images of such unlikely bedfellows as X-Ray Spex, Can, Phil Collins, OMD, Roxy Music, Derek & Clive, Peter Gabriel, System 7 and Wham!.

Despite his lack of profile today, when Key died in 1995, aged just 48, he did warrant a Guardian obituary. But even then, he was described as one of the music industry's "secrets".

For his many friends and former colleagues, Key's absence from the album cover canon remains an injustice. There have been periodic attempts to recognise his role in popular culture: as part of the Hull City of Culture programme, artist Scott King, a long-time fan of Key's work, staged a pop-up exhibition, Trevor Key's Top 40. Rumours of a book persist, but publishers have proved resistant.



Key's photography on OMD's Genetic Engineering sleeve. Art direction: Peter Saville. Designed by Peter Saville Associates, 1983

In this age of relentless self-promotion, where a carefully tended Instagram profile often counts for more than artistic talent, Key cuts a romantically anachronistic figure. He resisted marketing himself, refusing to appear in the printed directories by which photographers found

work in the 80s and 90s, and professing never to have found an agent who suited him - so he made do without one. "We quite like being hard to find," he once told his assistant, Toby McFarlan Pond, now himself a successful photographer.

He was determinedly uninterested in money. Writing about Key for *Creative Review* shortly after his death, Graham Vickers described him as combining "high levels of technical ingenuity with a designer's eye and, less happily, an art student's financial acumen". Stories abound of him working far in excess of the time he was paid for, so driven was he by the process of making images and the desire to achieve perfection.

With the odd notable exception, Key shot few portraits. "I did the people, he did the things," Cooke said of their partnership. Key came from the 70s school of still-life photographers who delighted in creating "impossible pictures". Pre-Photoshop, still-life photography was an alchemic affair involving endless tweaking of lights, coloured gels and props, and cobbling together bits of kit. Key's gift was to take half-formed thoughts from musicians, designers and art directors, and work out how to capture them in an image. Thus Saville's request for "a flower for the lobby of IBM in the year 2000" became the photograph on the inner sleeve of 1987's *Substance*, which looks every bit as effortlessly stylish today as when it was taken.



Key in the 1970s. Photograph: Don McAllester

The flower image - the creation of which Saville has described as "like silkscreen printing but with light" - was but one of a series of extraordinary New Order sleeves they produced together. Endless hours of experimentation by the pair would turn familiar items, such as a

leaf or a garden ornament, into objects of enduring beauty. The images made use of a process that Key later christened “dichromat” – one that has been endlessly copied by photographers since.

Digital technology has devalued the process of making images. As the cliché goes, we are all photographers now – bad ones, largely. Key represents a period when technical virtuosity and, crucially, the time it takes to practise it, were – at least sometimes – indulged, even respected. When searching for the perfect leaf for New Order’s *True Faith*, Saville and Key turned not to Google Search but headed off to Windsor Great Park where they spent the day gathering armfuls of prospective artwork into bin bags. Even then, Key wasn’t happy with what nature had provided, proposing instead to create a composite leaf by grafting together elements of several different ones.

Writing about Key for the Hull exhibition, artist Wolfgang Tillmans paid tribute to Key’s images, which had been hugely influential on him: “What impressed me most was their playfulness, stemming from a deep curiosity for the marvels of the photographic process.” Key, he said, “was using record covers as a venue for fine art photography”.

Key, I suspect, would have bridled at the suggestion that he was producing “art”. For him, photography was about finding a solution to a problem – often an extraordinarily beautiful or memorable one. The collaborative nature of his best work has a parallel with creating music back then. While we are seduced by the myth of the single creative genius, many elements of the songs we love were the work of highly skilled, but often uncredited, studio session players.

To the frustration of those who cared for him, Key’s role was often similarly downplayed. But, says his former partner, the stylist Lesley Dilcock: “Trevor should not be seen as some kind of victim in all this. He had 20 years to set the record straight himself before he died. He chose not to. He liked, I think, to be under the radar. He didn’t need to feed his ego with accolades.”

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*More information about the life and work of Trevor Key can be found at [abouttrevorkey.com](http://abouttrevorkey.com)*

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